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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a growing interest in career education in the speech communication field. Parallel development of interest in organizational communication has provided the impetus for the institution of curricula to train students to perform the role of organizational-communication specialist. This paper outlines the elements of training that should be provided to undergraduate students of organizational communication. Specifically, the student should be able to display a broad-based conceptual understanding of communication as an event and a process, should demonstrate proficiency in interpersonal communication skills, and should be able to integrate specialized knowledge of communication theory and skills with a general body of knowledge and to apply this integrated knowledge in organizational settings. In general, undergraduate training in organizational communication can be a means of providing career-directed options without sacrificing the liberal orientation that such a curriculum has traditionally taken. (KS)

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TRAINING UNDERGRADUATES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

by

William F. Eadie

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TRAINING UNDERGRADUATES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In the past several years, there has been growing interest in the speech communication profession in what has been dubbed "career education." Perhaps urged on by the shift in the most frequently-asked student question from, "Yes, but is it relevant?" to "Yes, but what kind of a job can I get with it?" many speech communication educators have been searching for ways to provide a career orientation within their curricula. This search has spawned a colloquy consisting of at least two books (Kennicott and Schuelke, 1972; McBath and Burhans, 1975), two special journal issues (Brown, 1976; Hall, 1976), and a host of articles and convention papers by such individuals as Sprague (1973), Muchmore (1973, 1975), Lockwood and Boatman (1975), Burhans and Gaske (1976), Hite (1976), Tubbs (1976), Schuelke (1976), Ferris (1976), and Goyer and Eadie (1976).

Meanwhile, there has been a parallel development in interest in organizational communication within departments of speech communication at U.S. universities. Downs and Larimer (1974), for example, reported that most departments surveyed who did not offer at least one course that could be classified as being even somewhat applicable to organizational communication would like to offer such courses if qualified instructors were available to teach them. Bassett and Jeffrey (1975) presented data that seemed to indicate that the Ph.D.-granting institutions in the U.S. are aware of this need when they reported that 75% of those institutions indicated that one or more of their Ph.D. candidates was specializing in

organizational communication.

The upshot of these surveys, descriptions and suggestions has been an increasing awareness of at least three points of agreement: (1) teaching or graduate study is no longer the sole visible career alternative for speech communication undergraduates; (2) to date, speech communication departments have not made a concerted effort to focus their curricula so as to enhance the employment prospects of their undergraduate majors; and (3) many present curricula could be adapted so that a more career-oriented approach could be taken. Given these points of awareness, and given the increasing interest in organizational communication, it is no wonder that several departments of speech communication have modified or are considering modifying their curricula to include a concentration in organizational communication as the means by which the goal of increased career orientation could be achieved.

Once such a curricular commitment has been made, however, a somewhat dissonance-creating problem often stems from that decision. The problem is a philosophical one and can be articulated by the question, "If we change our focus to emphasize organizational communication, does that mean that we are moving away from a liberal tradition and toward a professional or preprofessional orientation?" Those who raise such a question often point to directions taken by the fields of radio-television, journalism, speech and hearing sciences, and theater for data to warrant their claims. Specific objections raised by those for whom the question is a concern often include: (1) organizational communication is really not an unique area of study and thus does not warrant a separate concentration (the converse to this argument is that organizational communication is really no

different from management and should be studied in that department); (2) adding the label, "organizational communication," is not going to increase the marketability of undergraduates; and (3) either "we are giving up theory to teach skills," or "we are giving up skills to teach theory."

After working for three years in a program with an established (thirteen years old) concentration in organizational communication, which is located in an administrative unit where all the other departments provide preprofessional training, which, in turn, is located at a residential liberal arts university, I can attest to the potential schizophrenia that such concerns can create. As one who has experienced the dissonance, then, I would like to help forestall its occurrence elsewhere by presenting rebuttals to these concerns and by outlining a series of curricular objectives that I feel can be met by an organizational communication program that exists in a liberal arts environment.

Uniqueness - The root of this concern, I presume, reaches back into the older controversy as to whether the study of human communication is disciplinary or interdisciplinary. In essence, however, this argument is more sociological than it is substantive, focusing more on the status of the speech communication profession in the academy than on theoretical issues. While it is true that our theories and methods of research have largely been borrowed from other fields, such is true of all emerging areas of study, at least while they are emerging. If speech communication is "the field of study that informs all other fields of study," then we do have something to give to the social psychologist, the cultural anthropologist, or the manager in exchange for what we borrow in terms of theory and method. Consequently, organizational communication is not synonymous

with management or with organizational psychology, because those fields are interested in topics other than those which interest the organizational communication specialist. Moreover, organizations are not limited to corporations, as system theorists, and especially Thayer (1968), have pointed out clearly. The broadest definition of an organization implies that one is formed whenever individuals place themselves into a structure in order to achieve one or more functions.

This emphasis on the terms system, structure, and function cut to the heart of the response to the concern that organizational communication is simply interpersonal communication placed in a different context. While there can be little doubt that situational and environmental factors play a major role in influencing what is said and how it is said, such factors are often spatio-temporally unique and nonrecurrable. As a result, the contextualist must be content with looking for broad generalities that apply to most or all communication within that context. If, however, a system perspective is substituted, organizational communication becomes a supra-system of dyadic and small group communication. As a system, communication within organizations can be analyzed in terms of both structure and function, factors which tend to recur much more often than situations.

Labeling - The pragmatic question of marketability based upon the descriptors of one's course of study is a tricky one. Whorf's idea that changing the way people use language will change the way they perceive the world (Carroll, 1956) has certainly been the root of what Rein (1972) called "the strategy of redefinition," and such a strategy has been successfully employed by a number of social movements. The strategy works, however, if and only if people are willing to change the way they use

language. To this point, at least, the term "organizational communication" has become a part of the vocabulary of only a limited number of people.

The issue seems to be more than one of labels, however. A more basic question seems to be, "Do we really want to train people who will only be qualified to be communication specialists within organizations?" The consensus of thinking on this point seems to be negative. Goyer and Eadie (1976) argued that specialized training is more appropriate at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level. Fest and Papageorgiou (1976) echoed this sentiment, asserting that "undergraduate courses in organizational communication and related areas should be designed with the clear intention of providing information, as opposed to developing professional competence" (p. 23). Even at the graduate level, where Redding (1975) argued that specialization should occur in either a "humanistic" or a "scientific" mode, students were advised to develop a basic understanding of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of their counterparts. The solution to such a problem seems to be twofold: (1) design curricula so that students receive broad, integrated training in both the nature of communication and in how communication is structured and functions in organizations, and (2) mount a campaign to increase awareness of the term "organizational communication" as representing an area of specialization. Admittedly, the second solution is a long-range one; in the interim, students could be encouraged to "sell" their coursework instead of their major title to prospective employers.

Theory v. Skills - It is an interesting paradox that there are those who see organizational communication as being primarily oriented toward developing skills of communicating within organizations and those who see

organizational communication as being primarily oriented toward being able to understand, diagnose, and act upon communication problems within organizations. As a consequence, skills-oriented instructors and theory-oriented instructors both have the potential to see the institution of an organizational communication program as being threatening.

In actuality, organizational communication "experts" tend to see both theory and skills as being about equally important. Spicer (1975) surveyed a number of these specialists using a modified DELPHI technique to determine which communication competencies would be considered most important for students of organizational communication to acquire. Of the 44 competencies listed, 18 could be classified as being primarily skills-oriented, 19 could be classified as being primarily "understanding" or theory-oriented, and the remaining seven could be classified as being oriented to both theory and skills. The ideal curriculum in organizational communication, then, would seem to contain a relatively equal mix of both theory and skills.

II

Given that opposition to the institution of a program in organizational communication as a means of providing a career-oriented option in undergraduate speech communication training has dissipated, the focus of concern shifts to the curricular nature of such a program. Since model curricula are already in print (Goyer and Eadie, 1976; Pace and Feingold, 1976), and since the resources for providing such a program differ from institution to institution, this section will focus on the objectives for an undergraduate organizational communication program. While the primary objectives have appeared in slightly modified form previously (Goyer and Eadie, 1976),

my purpose here is to elaborate upon them in hopes of specifying what a student could be expected to be able to know and do as a result of majoring in organizational communication.

1. The student should be able to display a broad-based conceptual understanding of communication as event and process. Knowing how to communicate results only in the "has-nothing-to-say-but-says-it-well" syndrome. Avoiding this problem requires a systemmatic understanding of how communicative events can be analyzed and how communication acts as a process, both within the event itself and over time. Such an understanding is achieved through the integration of knowledge about the following communicative elements:

a. People - The study of people within communication systems generally occurs in both psychological and sociological forms. The psychological aspects of an individual (e.g., cognitive structure, personality, and perceptual processes) as well as the sociological aspects (e.g., selves, and roles) provide the student of human communication with insights as to how differing individuals might communication differently within the same situation, as well as on what basis the same person might modify a message from situation to situation.

b. Relationships - The study of how people form, develop, and disintegrate relationships through communication is essential to anyone who hopes to engage in effective interpersonal communication. Learning how to analyze the nature of relationships is a vital ability in terms of being able to detect communication problems.

c. Structure of communication - The structure of communication may be defined as the language, nonverbal signs, and symbolic acts by which

communication occurs. In studying their nature, an individual can learn how people construct and control situations through skilled use of signs and symbols.

d. Functions of communication - Communication functions have been hinted at by a number of writers, but only Dance and Larson (1976) have attempted to go about studying the functions of communication from a systemmatic perspective. These writers contend that communication functions to: (1) link individuals together, (2) develop and maintain higher mental processes, and (3) regulate interpersonal behavior. When viewed from these perspectives, the structural aspects of communication systems become more comprehensible. More work should be done to hone these functions of communication or to discover new ones.

e. Systems of communication - In a system perspective, it is important to become more aware of the components, interrelationships, and functions of any system, as well as what systems serve as subsystems and suprasystems of that system. By applying the system perspective to communication studies, sutdents can become aware of how the elements of communication structure and function change as the level of analysis changes.

f. Environments of communication - As communication is defined as being an open system, it is subject to interaction with its envrionment. Often, this environment will consist of suprasystems or portions of suprasystems of the system that is being studied. It is therefore important for students to become aware of what factors within the environment of any communication system might affect that system and how these factors change with increases or decreases in level of analysis.

g. Interrelationships among the above elements - Despite the

tendency to categorize, the above-listed elements are interdependent, and the student should be given the means by which to make the interconnections, if not the interconnections themselves in some cases. While we are not attempting to turn out robotized mechanics with a single, unyielding view of communication, we should also avoid presenting the student with a series of courses which have no apparent connections among them.

2. The student should be able to demonstrate proficiency in interpersonal communication skills. The term "communication skills" is usually defined with regard to those abilities required in speaking, listening, and writing. Though such a definition might be somewhat parsimonious, it does not take into account the interactive abilities that all communication requires. Spicer's (1975) data, for example, found that traditional topics of undergraduate coursework such as public speaking or technical writing were left off his final list entirely in favor of such abilities as negotiation skills, conflict management skills, interpretative skills, and situational diagnosis skills. DiSalvo, Larsen and Seiler (1976) echoed these sentiments when they found that four of the top five communication skills identified by executives as being important were functional skills: advising, persuading, instructing, and routine information exchange. The fifth, listening, was not defined, but when viewed as an interpretative (rather than as a retentive) skill it, too, fits into this scheme.

These interactive skills might be described as follows:

a. The ability to analyze interpersonal relationships - Included in this ability are such skills as information processing and organization, critical thinking, and separating facts from inferences. Individuals should be able to interpret the relational aspects of messages, which are often nonverbal in nature, and to determine to a fair degree the present state of the development or disintegration of any interpersonal relationship.

b. The ability to determine interaction goals - Individuals should be able to recognize what function is being played by the communication at any given point in time and to respond to that communication appropriately. Individuals should also be able to recognize that interaction goals are both individually and mutually arrived at and should know how to negotiate such goals on an explicit or implicit basis.

c. The ability to analyze environmental forces - Environmental forces usually operate to impell or to constrain communication. Individuals should be able to discover what these forces are and to make adjustments in communication behavior consistent with the goals of the interaction. Skills included in this ability are role-taking, interpretation of simultaneous communication (again, usually nonverbal in nature) for use as feedback, and empathy.

d. The ability to create appropriate message strategies - Once the nautre of the relationship, the interaction goals, and the environmental forces have been analyzed, the individual needs to be able to create appropriate message strategies to adequately respond to the analysis. Such creation is dependent upon the awareness of what choices of strategies are availablein this particular situation, the individual's ability to understand the structure of signs and symbols, and the individual's repertoire of those signs and symbols.

e. The ability to select appropriate media - Messages are not necessarily transmitted orally. Often a smile, a wave of the hand, or a shrug of the shoulder will be more appropriate than any words. Moreover, messages are not always appropriate for transmission in a face-to-face setting. Knowing when to use what medium and how to effectively use

that medium once it is selected is an important ability in any communication system.

f. The ability to detect and respond to change - Change is inevitable in any communication system. The skilled communicator needs not only to be aware of change in a theoretical sense but must be able to adapt to change in a practical sense. This adaptation requires that all of the above skills be integrated with each other so that a continual sifting and resifting of analytic, creation, and transmission processes is occurring.

3. The student should be able to integrate this specialized knowledge about communication theory and skills with a general body of knowledge and should be able to apply this integrated knowledge in organizational settings. Providing the student with knowledge about theory and developing skills in the classroom or laboratory is not sufficient in and of itself. In order for a student to be accepted as being "educated" a general body of knowledge must be absorbed and integrated. In so doing, the student should be encouraged to find interrelationships among fields of study, to search for ideational roots for concepts in speech communication, and to become aware of how the study of communication informs other fields of study. Most likely, the student should attain a more specialized knowledge of one or more areas of study other than speech communication. In such a case, these concentrations should be aimed toward focusing the student toward a career goal. It is in this sense that the study of organizational communication can be viewed as preprofessional training within a liberal tradition.

Moreover, the student should be encouraged to apply what has been learned to organizational contexts. Student activities often provide such

an outlet, as well as such off-campus programs as cooperative education and internships. Application project requirements can be built into the curriculum, such as courses in planning and executing persuasive campaigns or in conferencing. Projects can also be built into the structure of individual courses rather than becoming the focus of the course. In any case, applications often become not only effective learning tools but means of increasing marketability. An employer will be more likely to hire someone with experience than someone who simply has training.

In summary, then, undergraduate training in organizational communication can be seen as a means of providing a career-directed option to the speech communication curriculum without sacrificing the liberal focus such a curriculum has traditionally taken. Training undergraduates effectively in organizational communication, however, requires a strong, integrated mix of theory, interpersonal communication skills training, and application to nonlaboratory organizations. Not all speech communication programs have the resources to undertake this endeavor, but for those who do so, the effort is worthwhile.

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